

## *SECTION 2: ADULT STUDENT*

### *INTRODUCTION*

### *UNDERSTANDING THE ADULT STUDENT*

### *ADULT LEARNING THEORY*

### *LEARNING STYLES*

### *REFERENCES AND RESOURCES*

#### *1. Introduction*

Adult education students come from a variety of personal and educational backgrounds. It is important for adult educators to understand adult students and recognize their characteristics and potential barriers.

#### *2. Understanding the Adult Student*

Adult students enter the adult education classroom from diverse backgrounds with varying levels of educational experience. Some adult education students have just withdrawn from high school, while for others, years have passed since they were in a classroom. Adult students are unique. They bring life experiences with them that will affect how they learn.

Adult students are:

##### **Diverse**

Adult students represent a melting pot of diversity encompassing a wide range of abilities, cultural and educational backgrounds, goals, job experiences and learning styles.

##### **Practical**

Adult students often attend classes to achieve a specific goal or skill, such as to earn a GED, get a job, prepare for college, etc. Class attendance is often secondary to other responsibilities in their lives and adult students need to understand how classroom instruction applies to real life.

##### **Voluntary**

Most adult education students attend because they want to, not because they have to; they will leave if it does not meet their needs.

##### **Tentative**

Many adult students lack confidence in their academic skills and ability to learn. They may not have had positive school experiences in the past and may be embarrassed about returning to school.

## Assumptions About the Adult Student

Dirkx and Lavin (1995) and Pelavin (The Adult Learner) have offered summaries of characteristics of the adult student based upon the research and theory of andragogy and social learning theory. In the field of Adult Education, it is generally agreed that students possess the following characteristics:

1. Adult students are diverse, bringing a wealth of life experiences to the learning situation. Active forms of learning help connect the content to the students' own meaning structures. They:
  - a) vary widely among ages, abilities, job experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personal goals;
  - b) range in educational backgrounds from no formal schooling through many years of schooling;
  - c) carry well-developed personal identities; and
  - d) carry reservoirs of personal experiences, which are learning resources.
2. Adult students want to be able to relate content to specific contexts in their lives. These contexts are often in the form of a problem, issue or concern in their worksite - i.e. the ABE classroom. They:
  - a) tend to be pragmatic learners;
  - b) study to improve their performance in other social roles;
  - c) let their schoolwork take a back seat to other responsibilities, such as jobs and families;
  - d) expect their class time to be well spent; and
  - e) hope their courses will help them solve problems in their daily lives.
3. Adult students prefer to have some degree of control over their learning. They may evidence a greater or lesser degree of self-directedness depending upon their maturity level and familiarity with the content. They:
  - a) tend to be voluntary learners;
  - b) believe the decision to return to school is an important one;
  - c) believe that education will be helpful;
4. The adult's sense of self has a significant influence on the meaning of the learning situation for that person. Students have differing degrees of self-efficacy and awareness of their own learning styles. They may:
  - a) feel embarrassed about returning to school;
  - b) feel embarrassed to join classes with younger students;
  - c) hold negative impressions of their own abilities; and
  - d) hold negative impressions of schools and teachers.

### Student Barriers to Participating in Adult Education Services

Cross, 1931 (in Merriam) identifies three major categories of barriers that prevent students from participating in adult education.

- 1) Situational Barriers
  - a. Time
  - b. Money
  - c. Home responsibilities
  - d. Job
- 2) Institutional Barriers
  - a. Scheduling
- 3) Dispositional Barriers
  - a. Low student confidence
  - b. Negative past experiences
  - c. Lack of energy
  - d. Fear of being “too old” to participate

### Adults learn best when:

- They feel comfortable in the classroom environment.
- They have input or help to direct their own learning.
- They receive information in a variety of ways (learning styles/multiple intelligences) including social learning in small groups or peer tutoring.
- They understand how learning applies to their own lives.
- They experience learning in steps small enough to achieve success.

### 3. Adult Learning Theory

Malcolm Knowles, considered a pioneer in the field of adult education, popularized the term “androgogical” (student centered) as it made sense to have a term that would enable discussion of the growing body of knowledge about adult students parallel with the “pedagogical” (teacher centered) methods of childhood learning.

There are several approaches through which instructors can facilitate student-centered classrooms:

- Create a physical and social climate of respect.
- Encourage collaborative modes of learning.
- Include and build on the student’s experiences in the learning process.
- Foster critically reflective thinking.
- Include learning, which involves examination of issues and concerns, transforms content into problem situations, and necessitates analysis and development of solutions.
- Value learning for action.
- Generate a participative environment.
- Empower the student through learning.
- Encourage self-directed learning. (Lawler, 1991)

Knowles believed that:

1. When adults have reached the stage where they take responsibility for their learning, they need to be seen and treated by others as capable of self-direction.
2. Adults come to school with much more knowledge and many life experiences that aren't present in younger students. The knowledge and life experiences they have should be not only respected but used to increase learning in the classroom.
3. Adults want to learn new things and they want to be able to use that knowledge in their own daily life experiences.
4. Adults are problem-centered. That is they want to learn things that will help them perform tasks or deal with daily life unlike younger students who are more subject-oriented.
5. Adults want to know "why" they need to learn certain things. They don't want to expend energy learning something that they cannot use.
6. Motivation in adults is internal and revolves around self-esteem, quality of life issues or increased satisfaction with their jobs.

#### *4. Learning Styles*

Because adult students learn in different ways, effective instructors will endeavor to identify student learning styles and, in turn, present classroom content in a variety of ways, thus accommodating the different ways students learn and increasing opportunity for success.

Once the initial intake and testing procedures for a new student are complete, obtaining a learning styles inventory is a good next step. It can provide important information on how to help the student. The instructor can then streamline the student's learning plan by incorporating strategies that address learning styles.

#### **Learning Style Categories**

##### **Physical Learners**

Individual students will use a variety of physical senses in their learning. One sense may dominate the others.

The auditory learner is able to remember information that is discussed. This type of learning style needs the lecture method and time to discuss ideas in a large or a small group setting.

The visual learner retains what is seen or read. Pictures, graphs and charts can be helpful. These students like mind mapping or taking notes.

The tactile or kinesthetic learner needs the stimulation of physical experiences. Hands-on experiences are helpful for a student with this style. (Writing is not a kinesthetic activity. The movement needs to extend over six inches.)

##### **Environmental Learners**

One's surroundings must be conducive to the learning process. Noise levels and interruptions should be appropriate.

**Emotional Learners**

Instruction should be organized and structured into increments that are easily mastered. Students differ in the amount of direction they need. One may need constant direction and supervision, while another may be self-motivated and simply need guidance.

**Social Learners**

Some students derive more benefit from small group or peer tutoring while others need large group or one-on-one settings. Computer-assisted instruction lends itself to one-on-one instructional needs, as well as other formats.

**Psychological Learners**

How a student tackles the task of learning is important. The analytical thinker prefers a step-by-step approach, while others may prefer a holistic approach.

**Note:** Instructors should vary approaches to accommodate diversity while challenging learners to cultivate other styles/preferences.

*(This information comes from "The Complete Guide to the Learning Styles Inservice System.")*

## 5. References and Resources

Billington, Dorothy. *Seven Characteristics of Highly Effective Adult Learning Programs*

Indiana Department of Education/Division of Adult Education -  
[http://ideanet.doe.state.in.us/adulted/teacher\\_handbook.html](http://ideanet.doe.state.in.us/adulted/teacher_handbook.html)

Merriam, Sharan B. and Ralph G. Brockett. *The Profession and Practice of Adult Education: An Introduction*. Jossey Bass (San Francisco, California). 1997

Nebraska Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy -  
<http://archon.educ.kent.edu/~nebraska/curric/ttim1/aaal.html>

State of Florida Adult Basic Education Committee of the Practitioners' Task Force -  
<http://www.floridatechnet.org/inservice/abe/abestudent/comp1.html>